

## *Air Force Academy leadership and cadets look toward the future*

In one of the largest dining facilities in the Air Force, 4,125 cadets hungrily down their ham and croissant sandwiches, affectionately known as “fatty bags” for their extra caloric value. Twenty minutes later at 7:20 a.m., as fast as this huge hall filled up, it stands empty.

Walking outside into the cool autumn air reveals a scurry of activity. Everyone has the same destination — classes in Fairchild Hall. At a quick glance, this setting may resemble a normal day on any college campus. But the sea of blue uniforms, the steady salutes and the freshman cadets running along a small strip

of marble tile lets outsiders know this is the Air Force Academy.

But this academy is no longer the same place where marching “tours” on the Terrazo with M-14 rifles or in-processing on the ramp under the “Bring Me Men” sign are two events leading to graduating from the Long Blue Line.

Allegations of sexual abuse within the academy walls during the past 10 years have emerged that threaten to taint its proud 49-year history. Now, plagued with the highest number of reported sexual

assaults in its history, senior leaders and cadets are making historic changes to fix the problem. Today, this is a new and improved academy with sweeping changes in training, sexual assault reporting procedures and cadet life that will take a lot of getting used to, by those outside the walls as well as those within.

### **A tainted Long Blue Line**

The Air Force Academy is an institution with a proud tradition of service to the United States, marching out second lieutenants since the first class

# Time for Healing

by Capt. Christine L. Kunz ✱ photos by Tech. Sgt. Ken Wright

*In the wake of the highest number of sexual assaults reported in the academy's 49-year history, current academy leadership and cadets are standing tall, looking forward with a positive focus. “Ninety-nine percent of our young people are going to be absolutely superb second lieutenants, but it's our job that we graduate and commission the best and brightest,” said academy superintendent Lt. Gen. John Rosa.*



graduated in 1959. In 1976, women began studying alongside their male counterparts as cadets, and, today, women make up 17 percent of the cadet wing. The institution now deals with a cultural crisis that goes beyond the Rocky Mountain-draped campus and into the halls of the Pentagon and Congress.

In January 2003, cadets began contacting members of Congress with complaints of assault and indifference from commanders. Some cadets began going public, sparking several investigations by the Air Force, Pentagon and Congress. The probes documented 142 allegations of sexual assault since 1993. But that number could be low, as the Air Force's general counsel working group reported that the fear of retribution prevented some cadets from reporting sexual assault and other offenses at the hands of fellow cadets.

**Cadets began to see major changes in August 2003 during freshman basic cadet training.** *In the past, upperclass cadets would indoctrinate freshmen cadets with boot camp-style yelling (below) combined with extensive physical training. But one of the short-term goals of the new academy leadership was to bring training more in line with the operational Air Force. Now, training is conducted in a more participatory manner, with mentoring and some cold, hard stares (below right) as part of the new "four-class" system of leadership development that occurs during all four class years.*



Like any base throughout the Air Force, climate survey results were conducted at the academy, and recent surveys included cadet comments that showed not just a sexual assault problem, but deeper problems as well. The Fowler Commission, the only independent body to date formed to study the academy sexual assault issue, included a statement by a female first-class — senior — cadet from the 2002 climate survey when it released its report on the allegations in September 2003:

"There's a lot of stuff that goes on here assault-wise that's not reported. I know of two friends of mine who have been assaulted and don't seek help or prosecution because of what they see happens to victims."

And according to the latest 2003 academy survey, 22 percent of male cadets still believe women do not belong at the academy.

Now, 23 years after the first co-ed graduating academy class tossed its hats in Falcon Stadium, the Long Blue Line has become a little more black and blue.

### Deep roots

So, how could a sexual assault problem pervade the same marble terrazzo where Capt. Lance P. Si-

jan, the first academy graduate to receive the Medal of Honor, once walked?

The Fowler Report states this tolerance of sexual abuse was bred over a period of time. Although the new academy superintendent wasn't in command when the sexual assaults allegedly happened, he took immediate ownership of it.

"There have been signals at this institution for years that we've had problems, and as an institution and as an Air Force, we haven't embraced them," said Lt. Gen. John Rosa, addressing parents at the academy on Parents' Weekend in August 2003.

The secretary and chief of staff of the Air Force in March 2003 made a step toward serious reform when they replaced four top academy leaders and drew up new policies. They called it the "Agenda for Change," and it addressed leadership, cadet life and the broader academy climate. Ranging from how air officers commanding are chosen and prepared to how assaults are handled, the agenda is designed to make the academy more like the Air Force.

"While the 'Agenda for Change' was initially the product of our recent and widely publicized problems with sexual assaults, the changes we are implementing are not limited to eliminating sexual assaults," said Brig. Gen. John Weida, commandant

of cadets, in one of his "Commander's Guidance" reports sent to cadets in June 2003. The report is one of the new forms of communication with the cadets. "Indeed, in order to adequately improve the climate that allowed those problems, we must improve the underlying [values] of our cadets," he said.

The reports

point to a problem in the academy's character development and training. And that's where the new academy leadership is tackling this problem head-on.

### Training struggles

For Cadet First Class Keith Fitzpatrick, a computer engineering major and pilot hopeful, basic cadet training last August was something he was looking forward to. He would've had the chance to lead and help introduce freshman cadets to military life. He even attended the military training instructor course at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, last summer, as part of extra leadership credits. But what he didn't know was that sweeping changes in academy cadet training were taking place at the same time.

In this academic world within a military setting, cadets run the entire 4,125-person cadet wing, and are guided by faculty and senior Air Force leaders. The cadet wing at the academy is structured similar to an active duty Air Force wing with first-class cadets making up the officers and second-class cadets filling the noncommissioned officer leadership positions. Each squadron is assigned an active duty officer, or air officer commanding, and an active duty noncommissioned officer, or military training leader, to mentor and assist the cadet leadership and entire squadron in its training and educational missions.

A significant organizational aspect of any military academy, which differentiates it from the purely academic focus of a civilian university, is its military training component. At the academy, this training begins with basic cadet training, once conducted under the umbrella of a training structure known as the "fourth-class" system, with upperclass cadets in charge of training the new fourth-class — freshmen — cadets. Now, training is conducted under a new "four-class" system and an officer development system that focuses on mentoring and developing leadership potential in all four years.

"There have always been four classes with stated roles and responsibilities, but in reality, in my opinion, it's been largely a two-class system," General Weida said. "Once you've made it into the upper class, things are different in a lot of ways from the lower class, with most of them being in training roles. So, what we've done is gone to a true four-class training program for the entire year, as to not just focus on the fourth classmen. If you look at our climate surveys, where we have the most work to do is with seniors, the first class. Many of the negative attitudes have to



**While the 1,301 members of the freshman class have started their four years at the academy amidst new changes, senior cadets like Cadet First Class Kristina Belcourt prepare to leave behind four years of memories of a different academy in June.**



do with them. So our new training program will be a well-thought-out, purposeful training and education program to teach them all leadership and character development from the moment they in-process to the day when they throw their hats in the air at Falcon Stadium.”

The Fowler Report states that the potential for abuse of power at the academy exists due to many factors, including the supervisory role upperclassmen have over fourth-class cadets and the mission of transitioning cadets from civilian life to a military environment that emphasizes teamwork but is based upon rank structure.

The Fowler Report and the general counsel working group both state that sexual assault at the academy represented a “failure of character, and that sexual assault is a character-related problem.” More than once these reports stated that the organizational culture and programs aimed at character development and training may have resulted in failure of some cadets to live honorably — and indeed, to commit sexual assaults on their fellow cadets.

The new academy leadership is trying hard to find solutions to those past “failures” in order to move ahead.

“For the first time, we’re leading the new class of 2007 in the way we lead the rest of our Air Force,” General Rosa said. “We’re treating them like young adults, we’re challenging them. But the challenge is also on the upperclassmen to accept this change. We worry about the class of 2005 now, as they have the long haul of moving up amidst all this change.”

The first change — the No. 1 priority — was to put the academy response team in place to deal with victims of sexual assault. Close on the heels of establishing that team was to bring the academy’s training philosophy more in line with the operational Air Force, and it started with basic cadet training. Two weeks before basic cadet training began, all seniors and juniors were given new “marching orders” on how to conduct the three-week long training that culminates in a field exercise. The relationship between upperclassmen and younger students changed. Upperclassmen were asked to bark out fewer orders in boot camp fashion and work in a more participatory manner with underclassmen.

In the past, when fourth-class cadets arrived at the academy, they were immediately indoctrinated into a harsh discipline system that involved constant yelling. This type of discipline continued throughout basic

cadet training and most of the fourth-class year until “recognition” in the spring.

Portions of the “Agenda for Change” have refocused much of the initial indoctrination so initial training re-emphasizes fair treatment and mutual respect. The focus of the arrival of fourth-class cadets is now built upon treating them with respect and dignity and, in turn, earning their respect.

To that end, the academy developed a four-day orientation program geared toward a more respectful transition from civilian to military life. The content of the orientation includes more of a focus on the overall behavior expected of cadets and also provides material on sexual assaults. The grueling physical training was eased in hopes of giving new cadets a chance to better absorb information on military law, sexual assault, gender sensitivity and other issues. This is more in line with the operational Air Force, but not something upper class cadets were used to.

“It’s hard. Instead of telling people what to do, I have to now think about what I’m saying and doing,” said Cadet Fitzpatrick, a Princeton, N.J., native. “Be-

fore, if a lower classman didn’t do what you asked, you could discipline them with extra push-ups. Now we have to encourage them and show them why they need to listen.”

Another major training change is the phasing out of the cadet disciplinary system. The cadet disciplinary system gave commanders a way to deal with minor infractions, such as being late to class or breaking curfew, that don’t warrant formal military reprimand or charges. Once featuring demerits and marching “tours” — the hallmark of military academies for decades — cadet discipline will now rely solely on the punishment available under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and service regulations that’s used in the active duty Air Force. Such punishment ranges from verbal counseling to Articles 15 and courts-martial for the most serious offenses.

When past graduates hear the term “recognition,” they remember a proud moment as an academy cadet. Recognition was a key time in a freshman cadet’s life when he or she completed the initial phase of military training and earned the “props and wings,” a coveted

## Academy changes

One year after the “Agenda for Change” and subsequent independent reports, academy officials have 95 percent of the 165 action items in place. Confidential reporting of sexual assault is still being reviewed. For a more detailed look at the changes, go to [www.aog-usafa.org](http://www.aog-usafa.org) or [www.usafa.af.mil](http://www.usafa.af.mil). Here are a few of the changes:

- Separate billeting arrangements for female and male cadets in basic cadet training
- Any cadet found to provide, purchase for or sell alcohol to an underage cadet will be disenrolled immediately
- Discipline of fourth-class cadets by third-class cadets will be governed by a first-class cadet
- In the first half of the fall semester, only first-class cadets will discipline fourth-class cadets, and after Thanksgiving, selected second-class cadets can be given training responsibility for fourth-class cadets
- Third-class cadets will only interact with fourth-class cadets in academic mentoring and tutoring circumstances or on-the-spot training guidance
- Ostracizing of cadets who report sexual assault will be dealt with by cadet squadron commanders, and cadet commanders will be held accountable

■ Upperclass cadets who are aware of or observe criminal activity will be held accountable if they fail to take charge and exercise leadership responsibilities

■ In all reported cases of sexual assault, amnesty from academy discipline arising in connection with the alleged offense will be extended to all cadets involved with the exception of the alleged assailant, any cadet involved in covering up the incident, any cadet involved in hindering the reporting or investigation of the incident, and the senior ranking cadet in attendance (who will be responsible and accountable for all infractions committed by junior cadets)

■ Each incoming fourth-class cadet will have a second-class cadet mentor

■ The department of athletics has been realigned under the commandant of cadets

■ Associate and assistant faculty members are on three-year controlled tours

■ Officers and enlisted members are board-selected to train cadet squadrons

■ Officers selected for squadron training will receive a master’s degree in counseling or a similar area before reporting to the academy

— Capt. Christine L. Kunz



badge recognizing a cadet as a full-fledged member of the cadet wing. In the past, all fourth-class cadets received this distinction in the spring. Now, as part of a new “phased training plan,” fourth-class cadets earn them as a squadron at different times throughout the year, through a system that evaluates military and academic performance. Recognition is a term of the past.

### Conflict in reporting

As a senior about to graduate in June, 20-year-old Cadet First Class Kristina Belcourt has been through it all at the academy. She survived basic cadet training, marched tours on the Terrazo, went through survival training and even volunteered for the Cadets Advocating Sexual Integrity and Education program, a 24-hour, phone-in “hotline” administered by the Sexual Assault Services branch in the Cadet Counseling Center. She had to wait until her junior year to use a car or have a small refrigerator in her room, and only in her senior year could she carry a cell phone. But as part of the changes for the freshmen class, academy officials recently allowed freshmen to carry cell phones for the first time — to be used only for emergency calls.

At the top of the list of changes at the academy, according to General Rosa, was the establishment of clear sexual-assault reporting procedures. There is no discretion; it’s the obligation of any cadet or active duty member — even the victim of sexual assault — to report that a crime was committed.

“We don’t tolerate criminals; we don’t sexually harass people; we don’t sexually assault people. We’re not going to tolerate it,” the superintendent said.

Then why did so many sexual assault cases in the past 10 years go unreported? All of the investigative reports found lack of information was available to commanders because of the academy’s unique reporting process. Victims could report to the academy counseling center that they’d been sexually assaulted, but they didn’t have to formally report a crime.

Beginning in 1993, the process allowed for confidential reporting of crimes on behalf of the victims, according to Col. Debra Gray, vice commandant in charge of overseeing the academy’s sexual climate issues. Her role was created in the past year as part of the academy’s swift charge toward resolving problems. In the past, because victims were free to provide as much or as little information as they wanted, they had a large say in whether or not the cases would be investigated or prosecuted.

“They [the academy] struggled to balance the main-

tenance of good order and discipline with a reporting process that afforded victims of sexual assault their privacy, safety, and mental and emotional well-being,” the colonel said. “But the academy’s responsibility to develop the nation’s future military leaders made achieving that balance uniquely challenging.”

But on the issues of victim confidentiality and sexual assault reporting, the pendulum’s swing has reacted to extremes under the spotlight of high-profile cases, going from a position of total confidentiality and victim control over incident reporting to the new academy policy which eliminates confidentiality and mandates reporting, making it akin to its active duty Air Force counterpart. But this is something that doesn’t sit well with Cadet Belcourt.

“This is not the real Air Force when it comes to sexual assault reporting,” the 20-year-old history major from Waxhaw, N.C., said. “We have a different psychological response because we are isolated here with only one way to report an incident. There needs to be several ways because there are several frames of minds victims will get into. Women don’t want to make their dirty laundry known to everyone. Rape makes them feel dirty.”

The academy also created a new response team to deal swiftly with charges of assault by providing immediate assistance and tracking of cases. This newly formed response team is made up of professionals from a civilian-trained victim’s advocate group, Air Force Office of Special Investigations and the legal office. According to Colonel Gray, the original 24-hour, phone-in “hotline” system is being revamped so it works directly with her instead of a counseling center.

“You still need the peer piece in all this, and this way a fellow cadet will still feel comfortable starting the report with another cadet, but their role now as volunteers will be to guide and encourage them into the new reporting procedures.”

Now, one year after cadets began going public, General Rosa said 95 percent of the 165 “Agenda for Change” action items are in force and that all but one of the 21 recommendations from the congressional panel have been adopted. The missing piece is a policy on affording victims confidentiality in reporting, the balance they hope will encourage all victims to come forward. This policy is still awaiting final approval.

### The future hope

Along with 1,301 members of a fresh new lower class with a motto of “Now or Never,” Cadet Fourth

Class Christine Powers, a freshman from Hurst, Texas, looks toward the future with bright, hopeful eyes.

“Our class is brand new,” the 18-year-old said. “We have nothing to do with all of this, and by jumping right in with knowing nothing else, we’ll be able to help bring out a new generation of leadership.”

Whether the steps officials are taking will permanently alter what some critics have called a culture hostile to women is unclear. Previous attempts to address sexual harassment and assault at the military college — problems that have shown up repeatedly on cadet surveys — have not met with success, in part because leadership downplayed their importance over time, critics charge.

But with academy problems now knocking on Pentagon and Congress doors, and all future progress being monitored by annual cadet surveys, mandated inspector general reports every three years and the permanent placement of three oversight groups at the Pentagon, there’s hope a permanent solution is in the making.

As for the cadets, most of them worked hard for years to get into this school, and few are willing to abandon what they have achieved.

“It’s an honor to be here,” Cadet Powers said. “This is a prestigious institution, and I learn something new

about how to be a good officer every day.”

Current academy applications to join the incoming freshmen class next year are up more than 15 percent from last year, with the most significant increase being in the number of women applying. According to the academy, 2,966 women applied this year, compared to 2,223 who applied last year — a 35 percent increase.

“Many of these young people are bright and very talented, but they don’t understand what it means to raise your hand to take an oath,” General Rosa said. “We have to educate them, and by falling back on the profession of arms and our core values for training, we hope over time to change this tolerance of inappropriate behavior that has emerged.”

After a year of being in the media spotlight, academy leadership and cadets are ready to continue business. With fresh guidance, new changes, four new leaders and a hopeful lower class, the future of the academy’s cadet wing appears ready to trust and confide in its institution and handle any changes to come. ☺

**After waging “war” on sexual assault for the past year, academy leadership and cadets are looking toward a brighter future. With significant changes in place, the road ahead for the academy will be a trying one. But those leading the charge are willing to travel it together, as academy commandant Brig. Gen. John Weida said, “It’s a journey not a destination.”**

